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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the effect of the Great Depression upon sport in Canada. The difficulties of hockey and football teams are contrasted with the success of professional wrestling, horseracing, and bicycling. The economic plight of professional players who were not allowed to return to the "amateur" rank is discussed. Increased participation in activities such as softball, badminton, golf, skiing, bowling, and especially curling, is noted. It is observed that sport not only provided both entertainment and recreation, but also acted as a safety valve through which Canadians could release their many frustrations accentuated by the depression. (MJB)

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SPORT IN CANADA

DURING THE DEPRESSION

BY

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"The era of the 1930's was born in disaster, lived in turmoil and expired in a whimper": [1]

> It was a decade that destroyed men's faith in themselves, mocked their talents and skills, blighted their initiative, and subverted their dedication to the cultivation of their land. It shattered the morale of our inland empire, replaced a whole people's proud search for success with a dispirited search for security. [2]

The severity of the depression varied from region to region in Canada, but its devastating impact was felt in all parts of the country. Such an all-encompassing social and economic trauma could not help but affect the development of sport in Canada.

An examination of the development of professional sport during the 1930's reveals that the depression played a significant role. About the effect of the depression upon professional sport, Ted Reeves commented, ". . . sport was the last business to really suffer from the world-wide slump". [3] He felt that as long as people had a few extra quarters they seemed to be willing to spend them on a game that might help them to forget their troubles for a pleasant hour or so.

Reeves' theory was substantiated by the fact that until the end of the 1932 season professional hockey flourished in the National Hockey League (N.H.L.). The Rangers, Maple Leafs, Bruins, Maroons, and Canadiens played before packed houses, and star performers were paid from $8,000 to $10,000 for the season's skating. [4] However, in 1933 Ted Reeves reported that the depression had finally hit the N.H.L.:

> This year there is a salary limit of seventy-five hundred dollars in the N.H.L., and, while that is enough to buy the old potroast, it is doubtful if any but the most spectacular players will get anywhere near that figure when the next contracts are drawn up. The attendance has fallen off more than somewhat in such hot hockey centres as Montreal and Toronto, the prices of tickets have been slashed in New York, while the Detroit club is having a hard time to keep the wolf away from the turnstiles. [5]

The teams based in the large cities were still able to emerge from the worst year of the depression with a profit. But in 1934, after suffering a $60,000

deficit in the previous two season the Ottawa Senators became the first Canadian team to withdraw from the N.H.L. during the depression.[6] Then, in 1938 the Montreal Maroons were forced to give up their franchise.[7] Ottawa was too small to support a first-class professional hockey team during the hard times of the depression, and Montreal could not draw enough fans to maintain the operation of two teams. By 1939 there remained only two Canadian teams in the seven-team N.H.L.--the depression had been influential in shifting the top level of Canada's national winter sport across the border.

The depression struck a more devastating blow at the minor professional hockey teams. Writing in The Globe and Mail in 1932, Mike Rodden painted a dismal picture of the minor league scene:

> These days of stress have embedded the hockey clubs in their meshes, and it may be that some of the minor leagues will find it impossible to finish the campaigns. It is said that only one club, this being Quebec, is making ends meet in the Canadian-American loop, and that the Boston Cubs are losing at the rate of $1,000 a game.
>
> Reports from the International are just as gloomy, and following today's meeting at Buffalo it is likely that most of the players will be asked to accept reduced salaries, and the clubs will be forced to adhere strictly to the eleven-player-a-team rule.[8]

Rather than joining the ranks of the umemployed or those on relief, hockey players in the minor leagues generally accepted the "starvation wages" offered to them by the floundering hockey clubs.

As minor league teams ceased operation during the 1930's[9] a surplus of professional hockey players who were in a state of limbo was created. They were unemployed in the professional ranks and yet were not permitted to return to play for amateur or "shamateur" teams because the iron-clad amateur rule "once a pro always a pro" still held.[10] In 1933 the Canadian Amateur Hockey Association did bend the rules slightly by allowing amateur hockey players to try out for professional teams and still retain their amateur status provided that they did not sign a contract.[11] This did not benefit those minor league players who were already out of work. As a result of the existing situation whereby there was a superfluity of good players on call to the professional clubs the calibre of

amateur hockey rose, for good players were once again reluctant to sacrifice their amateur status especially when they often were receiving money "under the table" for their efforts in the amateur ranks.[12]

At the gate, minor league professional baseball in Canada suffered a fate similar to that of minor league hockey. By 1932 both Montreal and Toronto of the International League were experiencing financial problems. The Montreal Royals which had been revived in 1928 by a financial syndicate met with initial success. Unfortunately the depression came on too soon to allow this new effort a fair chance. The team kept operating under the worst kind of conditions until 1932 when there was a financial crisis.[13] This time a local group stepped in and saved the situation by buying the franchise exclusive of the stadium, which it rented on a pay-as-you-play basis.

In 1932 it appeared that the Toronto Leafs were nearing the end of their baseball trail when they failed to pay the city taxes which had accumulated on Maple Leaf Stadium for four years.[14] Although the Leafs managed to avoid losing their franchise they continued to experience financial difficulties and in 1937 had to borrow $35,000 to keep functioning.[15] Part of the Leafs' problem centred around their reluctance to reduce admission prices. In a letter to the editor in The Globe and Mail in 1933 a disturbed baseball fan complained about the exorbitant prices during an era of depression:

> Baseball fans--and Toronto is full of them--are forced to take themselves to the various city parks, where they see mighty good baseball for five, ten, twenty-five cents, as they can afford, and if, instead of holding us up at fifty cents and a dollar twenty-five admission, they would make a general admission of twenty-five cents and fifty cents they would find the attendance running up 15,000 to 20,000 every game. And is not 15,000 at fifty cents more profitable than 400, 700, and such numbers at eighty cents and a dollar twenty-five?[16]

In contrast to baseball and hockey professional wrestling thrived during the depression:

> While other sports suffer, owing to lack of financial support, professional heavyweight wrestling continues to be highly successful, and no abatement in interest has been noted. In fact, if anything,

> wrestling is enjoying an increase in popularity and particularly in the smaller centres. Many reasons have been advanced for this condition, but the most important is that the grapplers furnish plenty of action even if some of it is hippodroming.[17]

Roxborough also attributed professional wrestling's prosperity to excellent showmanship. Promoters carefully matched opponents and added traces of national rivalries to spark further interest.[18] Also, reductions in admission charges were made to keep in tune with the difficult times.[19] Lewis Brown suggested that sports like wrestling provided a safety valve through which fans could "let off steam".[20] Possibly it was in the wrestling arena that the victims of the depression could forget their plight temporarily and displace their frustrations into the drama that unfolded in the ring.

Another professional sport, six-day cycling, gained popularity in Canada's three largest cities (Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver) during the depression. The cyclists also put on a good show for the fans, saving the exciting jamming sessions for afternoons and evenings when large crowds were on hand.[21] As in wrestlin international flavour was added with peddlers from Europe and North America competing, and cyclists were paired together by the promoters in combinations that were likely to produce thrilling races.[22] The showmanship characteristic of both wrestling and six-day bicycle racing seemed to appeal to the depression-weary sports fan.

Although professional team sports like hockey and baseball also provided first class entertainment they differed from cycling and wrestling in some basic ways. The team sports had higher expenses simply because of the greater number of participants involved, and they therefore depended upon consistent support from fans throughout a long season, whereas promoters of wrestling and cycling could gauge the enthusiasm of crowds and could stage events just frequently enough to whet their appetites for more. Both professional wrestling and cycling were somewhat of a novelty receiving very little competition from the amateur ranks for spectators. On the other hand, amateur hockey and baseball were both extremely popular throughout Canada, and consequently many fans who could not afford to attend the professiona

games supported the "amateurs".

From the previous discussion it can be seen that some professional sports such as wrestling and cycling seemed to thrive upon conditions created by the depression whereas others like hockey and baseball suffered. In spite of the financial setbacks at the "big business" level of some professional sports the general trend towards professionalism continued with the growth of "shamateurism" during the depression. Throughout these times of unemployment men were forced to utilize whatever skills they possessed in order to make a living, and many athletes used their particular talents for pecuniary reward.[23]

The question of umemployment was paramount in the minds of many Canadians, and football players were no exception. Cosentino revealed that during the depression, centres like Sarnia which had a football team sponsored by an oil company suddenly found themselves with an abundance of talent. Bert Gibb would not attend Hamilton Tiger practices until that club bought him a new bicycle tire while another player would not compete until the Hamilton club filled his cellar with coal.[24] Umemployed American football players jumped at the opportunity to play for a Canadian team provided that they were rewarded for their efforts. In 1935 Joe Ryan, the Winnipeg general manager, acquired the services of nine American football players for $7,500. These players included Fritz Hanson, Bob Fritz, Bud Marquardt, Joe Perpich, Bert Oja, Herb Peschel, Nick Pagones, Russ Rebholz and Greg Kabat:[25]

> This was quite an array of talent to have assembled for so modest an investment, but those were the depression days of the "dirty thirties ", when a job was more important than money, and even college graduates had to eat.[26]

With the increase of American imports made possible by their low price tags during the depression Canadian football rapidly became professional during the 1930's even though it continued to function under the guise of amateurism.

Similar examples of "shamateurism" in hockey such as the Valleyfield Braves going on strike during the 1939 Allan Cup play-offs[27] can be cited.[28] Other sports such as baseball and lacrosse were also subject to the "insidious

influence" of professionalism. By the end of the 1930's the severe financial conditions of the depression had been a significant facter in the establishment of pseudo-amateur sport in Canada.

During the depression when unemployment rates were as high as 23 per cent, [29] Canadians had an abundance of leisure time. Sport became a favourite pastime for both the spectator and the participant. Although some professional sports failed to draw enough fans to prosper, amateur and "shamateur" sport attracted large crowds even when the unemployment and poverty of the depression were overbearing. On August 15, 1938, The Chronicle Herald reported the desperate plight of close to 5,000 Stellarton residents who were striving to obtain assistance from the nearby towns so that they might have food over the week-end. There were over 300 totally unemployed men in Stellarton and 1,200 miners who received pay envelopes for only one shift a week.[30] In spite of this deplorable situation, on September 5th of the same year Stellarton's softball team played before 4,000 spectators, the largest crowd of the season.[31]

The depression certainly did not dull Canadians' enthusiasm for sport. When the Winnipeg football team brought the Grey Cup to the West for the first time in 1935 the citizens of that city went "wild over the win":

> Depression, unemployment, its railway problem, the wheat problem, all the hosts of troubles sent to Winnipeggers were just so much nonsense to the citizens Saturday night as they set about the serious business of celebrating the glorious victory of their championship rugby team.
>
> The game was over not a second when the first tidal wave of exulting enthusiasm engulfed the city. On it rolled, touching, it seemed everyone from panhandler to professor, from society dowager to scrubwoman.[32]

Earlier in 1935 in Halifax tremendous interest was aroused in the Allan Cup series staged between the Halifax Wolverines and Port Arthur. Weeks before the games, officials of the Halifax forum were beseiged by ardent fans writing early to be assured of seats.

Those who were unable to attend major sporting events often could listen to the broadcasts on the radio. Hockey broadcasts were by far the most

popular form of radio entertainment surpassing programs like Jack Benny, Lawrence Tibbett, Wayne King, Frank Parker, Gaiety and Romance, Gentleman Jim, and the Youngbloods in listening audiences. Foster Hewitt's salutation "Hello Canada and hockey fans in Newfoundland and the United States",[33] beginning his broadcasts from the Gondola at the Maple Leaf Gardens was heard across the land. By 1933 even Vancouver hockey fans were able to enjoy Foster Hewitt's broadcasts. Radio station C.J.O.R. completed a hookup with the General Motors broadcasting system at the Arena Gardens in Toronto and began carrying Foster Hewitt's hockey broadcasts on January 5, 1933. The Vancouver Sun labelled this as "...the finest New Year's gift on the sports calendar".[34]

Foster Hewitt's own reflections expressed to sportswriter Henry Roxborough in 1937 give an even better picture of the popularity of his program:

> For the half-hour after I reach the gondola I am a silent observer, and not infrequently during this interval my imagination rides high and wide to the haunts of waiting hockey fans. It is reasonable for me to assume, from letters I have received, that in a lighthouse on the Bay of Fundy, a trawler on the North Atlantic fishing banks, a dormitory in a Maritime Ladies' college, a Hudson's Bay trading post far north of Churchill, a theatre in a French-Canadian community in Northern Alberta, a construction camp many miles from rail in Ontario, a barber shop in a small Saskatchewan village, or in a British Columbia home where mail comes only once a month, there are sports lovers anxiously awaiting zero hour.[35]

For a few hours on Saturday evening during the winter months of the depression Canadians seemed to forget their hardships and focus their attention upon "Hockey Night in Canada".

Other sports besides hockey were also delivered to Canadians over the air. In British Columbia starting in 1933 Leo Nicholson announced box lacrosse games on the radio. This program was rated highly in radio popularity surveys.[36] In 1935 Canadians listened attentively to Joe Louis defeat Max Schmeling, and two years later they heard the fight in which Louis successfully defended his title against Welshman, Tommy Farr.[37] These, and similar sports broadcasts, provided entertainment for depression-weary Canadians.

Yet another sport which provided entertainment for Canadians during the 1930's was horse racing.

Strange as it may seem, "the sport of kings" retained its popularity during the depression and proved to be financially successful:

> There is something about horse racing that appeals to almost everybody, not only those who are fond of racing, but even to the average person they can find something most exhilarating in seeing the noble equines battling to reach the wire in keen home stretch drives. Horse racing has gone on from the days of ancient history, and no matter what happened in the world--wars, earthquakes, racing has lived through it all. Everybody does not go to the races to bet, as some people think, but simply for the love of the sport.[38]

In 1933, the worst year of the depression, it was reported that in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, over 3,000 people, the largest attendance in 10 years, saw the Dominion Day horse races[39] The Mont-Royal race track in Montreal had approximately 9,000 people attend the last race day in 1933, and that week records were set in both attendance and betting. More than 59,000 people visited the track during the seven day meet, and the betting had increased by $50,000 over the corresponding session of the previous year.[40] Whittier and Polo Parks in Winnipeg drew daily crowds in the range of 8,000 people during the depression.[41] Most surprising of all was the fact that in 1932 Regina also hosted a successful race meet. Track officials had been fearful as to how things would turn out because there had been no crops for three years and nobody appeared to possess a nickel. As a precaution they cut the number of races from seven to six for the first day for fear that the percentage would not recoup them for the purses. Business was good, and meet officials replaced the seventh race after the first day of racing. The Regina meet prospered "...with a handle that was only just 9 3/4 per cent to 10 per cent less than in 1930".[42] Obviously man's gambling instincts could not even be suppressed by the economic hardships of the depression.

Not only did sport provide entertainment for the idle spectator, but also it served as a form of recreation for the participant. Many of the unemployed occupied their lesiure time playing impromptu games such as the following school-yard baseball game in Winnipeg vividly described by James Gray in The Winter Years:

> It was mid-afternoon in August 1932 when one of the supervisors at the Lord Selkirk school-yard playground strode into the pitcher's box, blew her whistle loudly, and made a short speech.
>
> "If this happens again," she screamed at us, "I'm going to call the police! This playground is for children! If you men want to play baseball you will have to do it after supper, because I won't have you big louts spoiling the fun for the children on these grounds. Now get off this playground and stay off or I am going to call the police!"
>
> As she angrily gathered up the balls and bats and waited for the school-yard to clear, it was apparent that her complaint was justified. There had been at least three baseball games going on, all composed of grown men whiling away a pleasant afternoon. The children were hived off in corners, or trying to dodge the hard-hit grounders from the adult games. One boy had zigged when he should have zagged and had run crying to the supervisor with a bruised head. The episode was a perfect answer to the question that was forever being asked: What do you do with your time on relief? We did anything and everything that came along.[43]

Gray also pointed out that any kind of home the unemployed could afford offered little attraction for even the most confirmed home-body. In most cases, home was a single room in a rooming-house, in which a family of three or four was expected to eat, sleep, and be happy. Happiness, for most, was achieved by spending as little time there as possible.[44] Playing sports, therefore, was one of the major ways that those on relief occupied their time.

In the rural areas, sports such as softball and curling occupied the leisure time of the farmers. In writing about the July 1st holiday in Wannego, Saskatchewan, Braithwaite illustrates how a sport like baseball played an important function in diverting the prairie farmer's thoughts temporarily from the miseries of the depression:

> I don't remember any patriotic celebrations or parades or pageants or bosoms swelling with pride or speeches by politicians. And I really don't know if this was because people didn't think about it or just didn't care. Certainly there was little in the mid-thirities to make us proud of being Canadians.
>
> But a Sports Day, now. That was a different batch of dandelion greens entirely. All the patriotism and pride was centred in the local community. Beat the other towns, that was the thing. Show them we could put on a better Sports Day, field a better baseball team, and ladies' softball team, prove that our young men could

> run faster than their young men. Competition. That was the outlet for our civic pride. And, after all, isn't that what life is all about?[45]

"Probably no other single activity did more to sustain morale in rural and small urban communities during the depression than did curling."[46]

In Saskatchewan during the 1930's when costs prohibited the construction of new curling rinks, curling enthusiasts improvised. The first rink erected at Stoney Beach, a small hamlet between Regina and Moose Jaw, was built of straw. At least one rink was frozen over an alley, with the walls of the buildings on either side for protection and the sky for a roof. In another community in Southwestern Saskatchewan where hay was not available, the rink was built of grain doors. At this rink they curled twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. The farmer members played during the daytime and the village members at might.

In his book, The Night We Stole the Mountie's Car, Braithwaite discusses the significance of the sport of curling in rural Saskatchewan:

> Curling has been the main winter pastime in Saskatchewan for as long as there's been a Saskatchewan, I guess, and before that. One of my earliest memories is of being left with my brothers and sisters in the big stone house in Nokomis while Mother and Dad were over at the rink curling. And of the great prizes Dad and my brothers would bring home--chairs, couches, fancy lamps, garden sets, and so on.
>
> It was the perfect game for the Praires, for it is played on ice and ice is what Saskatchewan always had plenty of. Besides, we had none of the modern winter blessings in those days. No television, no radio, no moving pictures. Just house-parties with dancing and singing, and curling.
>
> It was much the same in the Thirties, more so perhaps because money was so scarce. Curling cost little at that time. The annual curling club fee rarely ran more than five dollars and the rocks were provided. You had to buy a broom, to be sure, and that set you back almost a dollar. For the rest, the farmers just dressed as they did for work. Oh, here and there you'd see a white jumbo-knit sweater but they were considered pure swank rather than something to strive for.[48]

During the depression curling was also a sport played by the single young men in the work camps even though they did not have the proper equipment.

A reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press described how, at Camp 7 in Northwestern Ontario, unemployment project workers' carved wooden curling stones out of birch trees.[49] The men who were isolated at these work camps also took the monotony out of life by playing other sports besides curling. During the winter months hockey was equally popular while in the summer softball was played.[50]

Fortunately provincial governments recognized the value of sport in occupying the leisure time of the unemployed, and British Columbia with its Provincial-Recreation Program was the first to institute a government supported program in 1933. The main objective of this social experiment was to extend recreational opportunities to those people who previously did not have access to such opportunities, particularly the unemployed. The growth and success of this Provincial-Recreation Program in British Columbia was evident from the fact that enrollment jumped from 2,768 in 1934-35 to 27,072 in 1938-39 while at the same time the number of recreational centres rose from 19 to 155.[51] The Provincial-Recreation Program was so successful in British Columbia that other provinces soon followed suit. In the ten years following the inauguration of the Provincial-Recreation program in British Columbia inquiries were received about the plan from all provinces in Canada, from different parts of the United States, from Scotland, Australia, and South America.[53]

The "pro-rec" movement, the playing of games by the unemployed men on relief, the sports in the work camps, and the activities of the prairie farmer. were all indicative of a trend towards "getting into the game" during the depression. Increased participation in activities such as softball, badminton, hockey, curling golf, skiing, and bowling also demonstrated that Canadians became more active in sport during the 1930's.[54]

The type of sports played depended largely upon the size of the person's pocket book. The unemployed and farmers tended to choose games like baseball, softball, curling, hockey, rugger, and soccer--sports that required a minimum of expense. Those who could afford to do so gravitated towards sports such as tennis, golf,

badminton, sailing, and skiing while usually only the wealthy could afford to participate in sports like yachting and polo.[55]

Sport was certainly beneficial to Canadian society during the depression, for it provided depression-weary Canadians with both entertainment and recreation. Furthermore, sport seemed to act as a safety valve through which Canadians could release their many frustrations accentuated by the depression. Just as the wrestling, hockey, football, or horse-racing fan could discharge his pent-up emotions in the arena, at the stadium, or the race track, so too could the West and the Maritimes express their resentment towards Ontario in a socially-acceptable manner through inter-regional competition.[56]

Although sport did suffer some setbacks during the depression it became even further embedded into the Canadian way of life. During the "... decade that destroyed men's faith in themselves, mocked their talents and skills, blighted their initiative, and subverted their dedication to the cultivation of their land,"[57] sport sparked a glimmer of hope.

Footnotes

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